Our Children...

Today's Investment
Tomorrow's Promise

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The beginnings of all things are small.

– Cicero

Building an Early Childhood Development System for Nova Scotia

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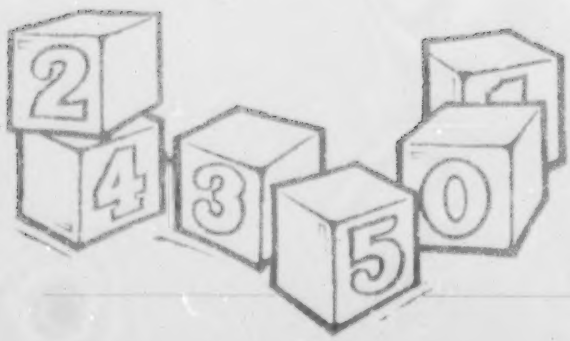
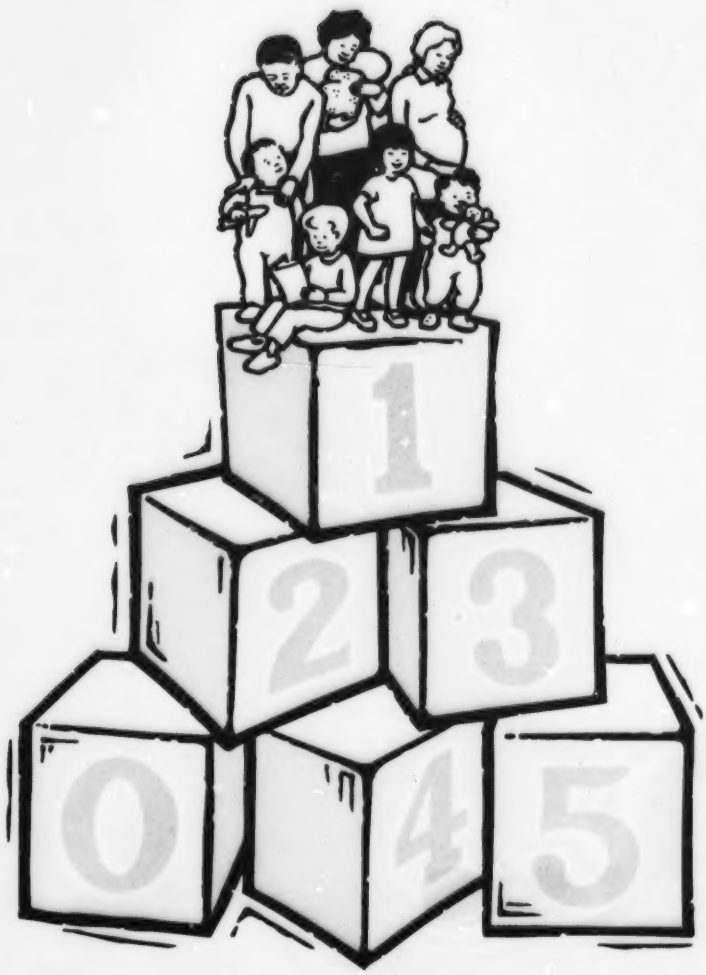


Introduction



Introduction

This report provides the framework for response to Nova Scotia's agreement with the Government of Canada to invest in an early childhood development strategy. As signatories to the September 2000 First Minister's Communiqué on Early Childhood Development (ECD), Nova Scotia is committed to the development of an early childhood system grounded in the growing body of knowledge on the importance of the early years. Nova Scotia will develop a comprehensive system based on our vision and building upon our current assets.

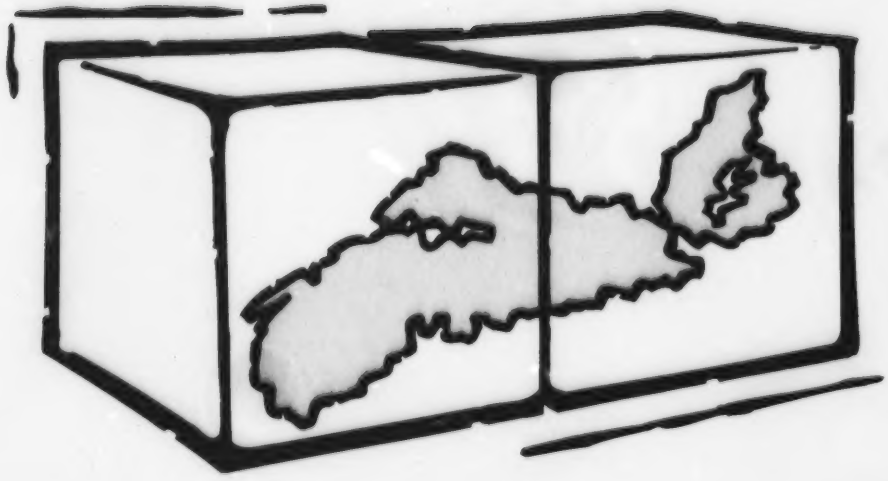
The Federal/Provincial/Territorial Early Childhood Development agreement includes four key pillars:

- healthy pregnancy, birth, and infancy
- early childhood development, learning, and care
- parenting and family supports
- community supports

In Nova Scotia we have a range of programs that support early childhood development (public health services, early intervention, child care, family resource programs, etc.). Often they were developed independently of one another and are financed through various funding streams and levels of government. This has resulted in programs for young children and their families that are often fragmented, isolated, difficult to access, and in many instances, under-resourced. Programs have been built on a "programs for problems" approach without the benefit of the new research on the health and well-being of children.

The ECD strategy presents an exciting opportunity to strengthen and re-shape our existing assets while investing our new resources towards a comprehensive and integrated early childhood strategy.

Vision for an Integrated
Early Childhood Development System



Vision for an Integrated Early Childhood Development System

Guiding Principles

- comprehensive
- integrated
- universal and accessible
- inclusive
- high quality
- accountable
- community-based
- respectful of diversity and regional variation

Our vision for the children of Nova Scotia is that they be valued and encouraged to develop their unique physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and creative potential.

In working towards this vision, we promote the adoption of the following values and principles:

- Children must be valued for who they are today, not just for what they may accomplish in the future.
- Children have the right to grow up free of abuse, discrimination, violence, and inequity.
- All infants and children must have a fair chance to develop their potential. Access to early childhood development programs must include all children and their families regardless of ability, culture, or geographic location.
- Parents, guardians, elders, and extended family members play a central role in nurturing children. Collectively, individuals, families, communities, and governments share responsibility for the well-being of children.
- All families need support at some point in early parenthood and will benefit from the opportunity to participate in programs that foster early childhood development. These programs must be accessible and unrestricted by eligibility requirements.
- Families and other people who provide the care and education of infants and young children must be valued.
- The act of caring for and educating infants and young children is important. Quality services support the individuals who provide care and education for infants and children, contributing to healthy child development. Training, consultation, and evidence-based program standards are key components of quality services.
- Services that support the well-being of children and families must be proactive, preventive, and family-centred and must reflect the diverse traditions and cultures of Nova Scotia.
- Proactive and preventive family-centred services incorporate the three basic components of prenatal and infant care, early childhood learning and care, and parenting and community supports. These programs must build upon existing programs and services across sectors and jurisdictions, be delivered locally, and reflect community cultural values and geographic realities.

Why Invest in the Early Years?

- What makes a difference for young children and their families?
- What is the promise of new investments for young children?
- How can we make the most of this opportunity?

We have access to a compelling body of knowledge derived from an array of disciplines and research that confirms what many have intuitively known to be true. The early years last forever. These years lay the foundation for lifelong determinants of optimal health and well-being inclusive of: learning readiness; secure attachments and identity; social engagement and competence; and active living. In addition, the incentive to invest in the early years as an economic strategy is well established. The fiscal argument for investing in early childhood programs has gained momentum. Recent shifts in economic policy emphasize open economies and require a well-educated and flexible labour force in order to compete globally. Therefore, it is vital that we support and value children today in order to ensure their futures. Towards that end we must invest in programs and opportunities that allow children to be as healthy, happy, and secure as possible.

As we begin the 21st century, families are coping with rapid change. The current social and technological revolution affects all aspects of the social and economic fabric of our society. Approximately 70 per cent of mothers of young children are working outside of the home. Shift work is increasing, and wages have remained relatively stagnant. Increasingly, family structures are changing, and young families are without the benefit of extended families nearby for support.

We can no longer consider the needs of young children solely as the private responsibility of their parents. Policies and systems that support families must reflect these increasing pressures and new realities of family life.

Our major challenge is to identify the key areas of investment that will create the strongest foundation for infants and young children from birth to six years of age. We need to choose programs that are beneficial in and of themselves and serve as key linkages to other support services. The research tells us that:

- We must begin as early as possible in the lives of children.
- We can improve outcomes for children by investing in their natural environments
  - at home
  - in early childhood care and education settings
  - in family resource settings
  - within the informal child care sector
  - in recreation settings.
- We need a system that serves children from conception until school entry.
- Quality early childhood services must be developed and delivered by the community to meet its own unique needs.
- Some children will require special interventions to help them to develop to their full capacity.
- Early childhood services support children, parents, employers, and local communities and contribute in many ways to meeting the needs of a healthy and prosperous society.
- Quality preschool programs ensure that children will have "... the opportunity to benefit from all that school has to offer, both academically and socially." (Doherty, 1997)

Building the Nova Scotia Early Childhood Development System

Research tells us that there are some essential building blocks in a comprehensive Early Childhood Development system. These include:

- a home-visiting program that includes health promotion and support as well as both early identification and a direct entry point into a comprehensive early childhood development system
- a range of quality child care programs, including infant, toddler, and preschool programs
- specialized services to enable children with special needs to reach their potential
- parent education and ongoing support to families and communities

What Must We Do?

Navigating the Course Between Vision and Implementation

Navigating the Course Between Vision and Implementation

Every year 10,000 children are born in Nova Scotia. Communities have responded to the best of their abilities to meet the needs of these young children and their families. They have shown they care and are willing to invest their time and energy in developing services for young children. An early childhood development system for Nova Scotia will build on our existing strengths and assets.

We recommend that Nova Scotia adopt what McCain and Mustard (1999) describe as a community-based evolutionary approach. This approach allows a blending of public and private supports with communities to form the foundation of an early childhood development system. Respecting the role of community in planning and developing services ensures sensitivity to local characteristics, provides parental choices, encourages flexible approaches, and builds social cohesion.

The identified strategic priorities are integral to the development of a system-wide approach to early childhood development in Nova Scotia.

Priorities for Initial Investment

1. Establish a comprehensive home visiting program
2. Stabilize and enhance the current child care system
3. Develop a coordinated system of early childhood development

1. Establish a Comprehensive Home Visiting Program

Healthy babies are born to healthy mothers. A healthy pregnancy increases the likelihood of a full-term, uncomplicated birth, healthy birthweight, and promotes brain development. Good prenatal care, nutrition, and healthy lifestyle choices all contribute to good birth outcomes.

Home visiting is a crucial component of early intervention and prevention services, not only to identify expectant parents and families who may encounter difficulties, but also to link them to relevant services. Many researchers, policy makers, and practitioners have recommended the expansion of home visiting programs to improve developmental outcomes for those children most at risk. Home visiting programs provide an early entry point (pre- and postnatal) into the service system for parents and offer sustained support for those with greater need. Home visiting is not an end unto itself. It is one component of an integrated service system linking families to health, social, and educational systems as well as to other community-based supports. Home visiting is most effective if it is started early and is intensive, flexible, and sustained.

Current Context

Prior to 1992 all new families in Nova Scotia were offered professional public health home visiting services to provide support to new moms during the adjustment period with their newborns. In 1992, as a result of service delivery redesign, mothers and their newborns began to experience earlier hospital discharge. At the same time, there was a debate in the literature on the efficacy of universal versus targeted public health home visiting programs. As a result, Public Health Services embarked on a new direction.

The new program, known as the Visiting Infants and Parents Program (VIPP), introduced a universal screening system to identify families who could most benefit from more intensive health challenges of infants and postpartum mothers and their families. However, service devolution and declining resource allocations have resulted in a service delivery model that does not incorporate a provincial perspective. This has resulted in a program that is not equally available throughout the province.

"Healthy Start" Nova Scotia

We propose that an investment be made in a province-wide comprehensive home visiting program called "Healthy Start Nova Scotia." This program, delivered through Public Health, will provide a continuum of care from the community to the hospital and back to the community for all expectant parents, new parents, and newborns.

The population's health begins with healthy babies. Healthy babies grow into healthy children and youth. The importance of early and ongoing healthy lifestyles through education and the development of solid parenting skills cannot be understated.

The goal of the Healthy Start Program is two-fold:

- to promote the optimal physical, emotional and social development of the newborn with their family
- to reduce the conditions that create risk of child abuse, neglect or injury.

The cost of a home visiting program was determined based on population health ratios and the experiences of several Canadian jurisdictions - such as Manitoba (Healthy Start) and Ontario (Healthy Babies, Healthy Children) who have implemented a blended approach, employing both lay and professional home visitors. Lay or community home visitors have been used to improve healthy child outcomes in the context of a range of services. Trusting relationships and frequent contact with a peer, provide experientially based support. (Behrman, 1999).

Healthy Start Nova Scotia will use a combination of public health nurses and trained lay home visitors. Program services will begin prenatally - as early as possible. Through existing and enhanced public health routes all efforts will be made to assess the learning and health care needs of all expectant parents. Based on this assessment, expectant parents will be referred to appropriate programs and services, such as prenatal classes, nutritional counselling, information, and specialized programs such as the Healthy Baby Program, Breastfeeding Information and Support, and Canada's Prenatal Nutrition Programs.

Postpartum, all mothers and infants in Nova Scotia will be screened for health and psychosocial risk. This universal screen will be completed by either a hospital nurse or a public health nurse. At this time, encouragement will be extended, key information will be provided, and all families will be offered a home visit. While all families of newborns can benefit from support, we recognize that families experiencing isolation, financial difficulty, and inadequate social support networks need extra support and nurturing to help them and their babies get the best start possible. A professional public health nurse will open the door to Healthy Start by providing an initial home visit. In the family's home environment the nurse will work with the family to identify the types of supports they require. For families needing additional support, the service and support of either a professional nurse or a lay home visitor will be offered to the family.

Lay home visitors will be chosen based on their life experiences, their warmth, and their ability to empathize with the family's situation. The lay home visitor initially will concentrate on building trust. Goal setting and ongoing coordination of services through regular home visiting will be key components of the program, and the frequency and intensity of services will be determined by the assessed levels of the family's needs. Healthy Start is therefore a key entry point to the early childhood development system, which will enable the family to have a constant source of support, information and referral, and linkages to a whole array of services from the baby's birth to three years of age.

Expected Outcomes

This home visiting approach has been proven to promote maternal and child health and to reduce the conditions that lead to child abuse and neglect. Healthy Start Nova Scotia will help to encourage positive parenting "right from the start" and will provide the opportunity for early identification and interventions for children with special needs. Parents will demonstrate increased confidence, knowledge, abilities and behaviors appropriate to healthy child development.

2. Stabilize and Enhance the Current Child Care System

Learning begins at birth and is a continuous process. The years from birth to six lay the foundation for lifelong health, competencies, and learning. We now live in a world where the majority of young children spend most of their waking hours in licensed and unlicensed child care. The care and education of young children are not two separate entities in the early years. Quality child care offers the ongoing opportunity for children's learning while providing safe and reliable care that fosters socialization, health, and a child's well-being. Preschool prepares a child to benefit from all that school has to offer, both academically and socially. "A good start in school increases the likelihood that a child will complete high school, find and retain employment and become a contributing member of society" (Doherty, 1997). Research indicates that the quality of the child care experience can have an effect on children's current and future development. High-quality care supports children's physical, emotional, social, and intellectual development and well-being. There is an abundance of research describing the components of good-quality child care. These include factors such as adequate adult-to-child ratios, small group sizes, appropriately trained and remunerated caregivers, safe and attractive environments and play spaces for children, and child-centred curricula. In a child-centred curriculum there is a blend of quiet and physically oriented activities, including a balance of indoor and outdoor play. There are opportunities for free play, child-directed and teacher-directed experiences. Children learn and grow when they are cared for in respectful, responsive, developmentally appropriate environments where adults treat them as important individuals in their own right.

Regulations and standards with clear monitoring and reporting requirements further ensure high-quality services.

Studies show, however, that the majority of the child care centres in Canada are providing care that is of minimal to mediocre quality. The informal child care sector is even more of an unknown. It is widely understood that a number of factors impede the achievement of quality, including low wages, which result in high staff turnover and inadequately trained practitioners; provincial regulations that address only the minimum standards; inadequate facilities and crumbling infrastructures; and weak curricula. All of these factors are affected by inadequate resource allocation. Children's well-being and development suffer when they have less than quality care. Even an advantaged family background cannot compensate for the negative effects of poor quality child care.

Access to quality licensed child care is therefore an integral component of the ECD system. The literature tells us that our children's well-being is compromised by poor-quality programming, second-rate facilities, inadequate supervision, lack of stimulation, and non-supportive interaction between staff and children. Perhaps the most critical concern facing the child care field today is the inability to attract and retain adequate numbers of trained practitioners. The quality of child care is dramatically affected by the significant human resource issues of staff turnover, training, and retention.

Current Context

Early Childhood Development Services of the Department of Community Services is committed to

- promoting the healthy development of children between the ages of 0–6 years by supporting and developing quality early learning and care programs in Nova Scotia
- supporting parents who need child care while they work or attend school or training programs by providing subsidies to offset the cost of licensed child care

Efforts to achieve these goals have focused on licensing and monitoring child care programs, developing policies and standards for child care centres and programs, approving new early childhood education training programs, promoting awareness among parents and community members about quality child care choices, and conducting audits and reviews on selected child care programs.

Recent data for Nova Scotia tell us that

- There are 155,445 children aged 0–12 years (1996 census), 65,000 of whom are under 6 years of age.
- There are approximately 93,000 children aged 0–12 years who have mothers in the paid work force.
- There are 11,464 full- and part-day licensed spaces shared among 169 full-and part-day non-profit centres and 198 full-and part-day commercial centres.
- Approximately 70% or 45,500 children 0–6 years old have mothers in the paid workforce.
- An estimated 23% or 10,700 of these children are in licensed full or part-day child care programs.
- Upwards to 80% of children with working mothers are cared for in unlicensed or informal care arrangements.

Child care in Nova Scotia has experienced minimal growth in the 1990s. Over the last decade the number of licensed child care spaces has increased slightly while the number of child care centres has decreased. Outside of the subsidy program of the Department of Community Services, limited resources have been committed to promote and enhance flexible and high-quality child care options for all Nova Scotian families. Since the elimination of the federal Local Initiative Program grants in the 1970s, there has been virtually no capital funding for start-up of new child care programs in the public sector. In the absence of government funding for the start-up of public, non-profit child care, most of the growth in new spaces over the last several years has been in the commercial sector.

In Nova Scotia, legislation is in place that governs the licensing of child care programs and limits the number of children that may be cared for in an unlicensed arrangement. The Department of Community Services provides subsidy funding for parents unable to pay the full child care fee. Several grants that support such things as equipment purchase, operating expenditures, special needs support, infrastructure, and salary enhancement are paid directly to support non-profit child care centres. The grant formula has been in place for many years without increase, and does not currently meet the needs of either the non-profit centres receiving these funds or the larger needs of the child care community. For this reason the Department is currently involved in a thorough review of the manner in which it delivers financial support to child care programs in this province. That report will be completed in Spring 2001.

Since 1991, the child care sector, stakeholders, and government have identified the issue of inadequate wages as an impediment to maintaining a well-qualified, stable work force in the sector, which has a direct relation to the quality of child care in the province.

Investing in Nova Scotia's Child Care System

As a first step towards building a responsive and comprehensive child care system for Nova Scotia, we propose that an investment be made to strengthen and stabilize existing full day licensed child care programs. Expanded grants, governed by a specific set of guidelines, will ensure an appropriate allocation of funds. Low wages and inadequate training opportunities have created a crisis in staff recruitment and retention in child care. This sector requires an immediate infusion of resources to stabilize salaries and to enhance training. In building the system, we will also continue to expand access and affordability of child care for parents with the least resources.

Young children with special needs are best served in inclusive settings in their own communities. Early identification and intervention are critical to ensuring better outcomes for children who may require additional supports. Targeted programs that focus on special populations of young children—e.g., children with disabilities, mental health challenges, etc.—work best when offered within an early childhood system designed for all families. Funding through the special needs child care program will be allocated to ensure that such services and programs are offered in inclusive settings.

Expected Outcomes

Stabilizing the current child care system will ensure an enduring child care work force thereby improving child care quality. Expanded and enhanced services, for all children, inclusive of children with special needs will ensure continued opportunities for learning and care within integrated child care settings.

3. Developing a Comprehensive System of Early Childhood Development

The Early Childhood Development system we envision for Nova Scotia requires strengthening and weaving together existing programs. We also need innovation in new program options. The system will support children's learning in a myriad of ways from parent education programs, family resource centres, and early intervention programs and through a whole range of early childhood development options. Coordinating resources to support parents and improve access to services is part of a comprehensive system of early childhood development.

Nova Scotia currently has a limited number of programs that a minority of children access. Child care is not linked with other child and family services in the community so that the needs of children and families are met in the best way possible. Parents are mostly on their own when it comes to locating and retaining child care. Access to a range of child care options, parenting supports, and early childhood development information remains a challenge for most parents and communities across the province. Resources are not coordinated nor are they easily accessible to most families. It is important that we no longer separate "care" from "education" and from "parent support." These must be combined to meet the needs of children and families. To achieve this, linkages will need to be made between programs and supports at the community level. In this way we will truly build a comprehensive system of supports for families.

A Coordinated System of Early Childhood Development

Developing a coordinated system of early childhood development requires new investments in

- child care resource and referral
- pre-service and in-service training
- centre-based child care programs
- infant care
- full- and part-day programs including child development centres
- parent support and education
- fully integrated special needs child care and individualized program planning
- seasonal and emergency care
- family child care

Expected Outcomes

- coordinated information and referral for parents
- innovative programs
- increased parental choice
- improved access for families to a full range of child care options in the community
- enhancement of the quality of care provided in all settings
- greater retention of child care staff
- a coordinated system that provides opportunities for provincial/regional training
- support for parents and caregivers

A Comprehensive System for Early Childhood Development

Model to ensure coordination, access, and timely response

Glossary of Terms

Children and Youth Action Committee (CAYAC)

An interdepartmental committee of senior officials established to provide coordination and collaboration on issues concerning children and youth. Representatives from the Departments of Community Services, Health, Justice, and Education and the Youth Secretariat make up this committee.

Child Care

The non-parental care of infant, toddler, preschool, and school-age children in formal and informal settings, providing for their physical, social, emotional and intellectual development.

Child care may be offered in a licensed non-profit or commercial setting. Non-profit refers to the situation wherein a centre is operated by a voluntary board of directors.

The term "commercial" is used to refer to child care centres that are incorporated as for-profit business operations.

Child Development Centres

Non-profit part-day licensed child care services run by a board of directors. These support services are proven to significantly benefit less-advantaged children. Currently, the Department of Community Services funds 32 of these centres (694 licensed spaces) by way of operating grants.

Child Care Resource and Referrals

Regionalized, community-based child care services designed to:

- coordinate, enhance and improve the quality and accessibility of a range of child care options for families;
- develop child care services that provide local solutions to the unique needs of local communities;
- compile and share information with parents, child care providers and communities;
- provide child care provider recruitment, parent referral, and parent and provider training and support in the communities they serve.

Early Intervention Services

The goal of early intervention is to help children (from birth to five years of age) with developmental disabilities reach their potential by working directly with children and families in their homes. The Department of Community Services provides grants to support these programs, develops policies, standards and procedures, and assists community groups in starting programs in their local areas.

Family Day Care

The non-parental care of a child for any part of a 24-hour day in a home setting other than the child's own home. In the Nova Scotia model, the home in which the care is provided is approved by a Family Day Care Agency, meaning it has passed a health and safety check. The individual caregiver is also approved by trained agency staff (home visitors) in keeping with criteria outlined in the Guidelines for Operating a Family Day Care Agency in Nova Scotia.

Subsidy

Financial assistance provided to licensed child care centres or family child care agencies on behalf of parents to help to offset child care fees.

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